

2001/2002 RIVER OTTER SURVEY
BRIEF SUMMARY
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Background

The 2001/2002 winter bridge survey was the second annual survey of this type. The objective of the survey is to search for otter sign at stream crossings. As in the previous winter, Districts were provided with a survey protocol and maps showing the locations of bridges to be checked for otter sign. Ice and snow are prerequisites for this survey since they simplify sign detection and identification. An unusually mild winter 2001/2002 provided only a small window suitable for river otter bridge surveys.

Results

One hundred-eleven bridges¹ and their vicinity were searched for river otter sign (Figure 1). Of these, 10 were positive for otter sign. The types of sign encountered were slides (often in combination with tracks) and feeding stations (Figures 3-5). At 4 additional bridges identification of signs present was ambiguous but suggested otter.

All bridges positive for otter sign are located in areas previously identified as core areas for the Nebraska river otter population (Figure 2).

Bridges selected for this winter's survey had past otter observations associated with them or their vicinity. This selection process is done in an effort to develop a list of indicator bridges that will be continuously expanded as additional sightings are made at or near bridges not yet included in the survey.

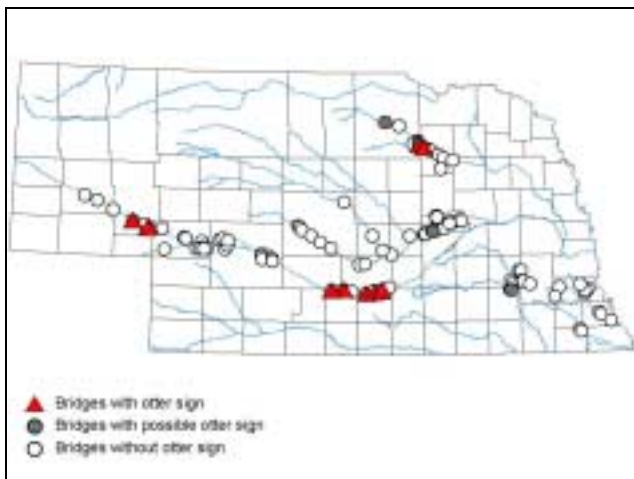


Figure 1: Location of bridges surveyed during the 2001/2002 river otter bridge survey.

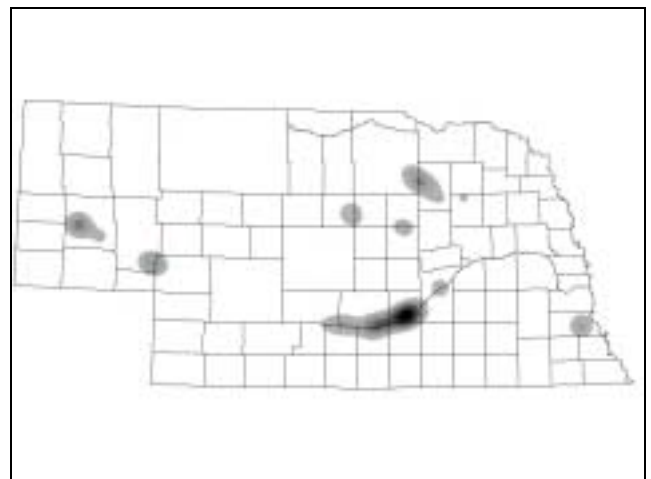


Figure 2: River otter core areas based on accidental captures, bridge surveys, and observations from 1992 to 2002. Note that this is not a distribution map.

¹ An additional 29 bridges were visited but did not provide conditions that met the survey requirements.



Figure 3: River otter slides and tracks at a Platte River bridge near Lewellen. Photo: Chad Switzer, 2002.



Figure 4: River otter tracks and feeding station on pond near Oshkosh. Photo: Chad Switzer, 2002.



Figure 5: River otter slides and tracks on the Platte River on Blue Hole WMA. Photo: Daylan Figgs, 2002.

Conclusion:

Weather conditions during winter will continue to be a major constraint on our ability to conduct this survey. However, winter sign surveys are an efficient way of augmenting and even replacing the traditional observation reports with more accurate and less opportunistic data. Identification and long-term monitoring of “indicator” bridges across the state will increase the resolution of our river otter distribution map and potentially enable us to detect large changes in the population. The use of aerial surveys for sign detection should also be evaluated during subsequent winters.